DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 680 CG 012 281

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TITLE Some Policy and Program Implications of an Overview of Research Concerning Adolescent Sexuality.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations (San Diego, California, October 12-15, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Attribution Theory; *Biological Influences; Family Life; *Illegitimate Births; Literature Reviews; *Psychological Characteristics; Self Esteem; *Sexuality; *Social Influences; Socioeconomic Influences

ABSTRACT

There is great public concern about illegitimate births among adolescents. The consequences of this early illegitimate childbirth have been treated in a simplistic manner to date. Several causes of the problems are: (1) young adolescents fail to prevent pregnancy when they feel there is little future or reward for them in society; (2) teenagers suffering from low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness and distrust have more incidence of pregnancy; and (3) developmentally, many of these adolescents are unable to deal independently and have value confusion. The increase in teenage illegitimacy has implications for programs and policies to aid this population with humane and honest approaches to sexuality. The criteria for success also includes helping adolescents to clarify their values, increasing their communication skills, and facilitating their development of self-trust. (HFD)

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SOME POLICY & PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS OF AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH CONCERNING ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY *

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Prepared for the 1977 Annual Meeting of the
National Council on Family Relations
San Diego, California

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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INTRODUCTION

Immediate public concern about adolescent sexuality is chiefly focussed on the rising rates of illegitimacy among adolescents, especially among those under the age of 18. For this group there was a rise in illegitimacy rates of about 70 percent between 1963 and 1973 . (See Table I) Of further particular concern is the far higher rate of out-of-marriage births to black teenagers - with rates being about eight times greater (See Figure 1). It is important to bear in mind that over-all, the teenage birth rate has declined since 1960, including a decline between 1970 and 1975, except for 14 year olds. The rise in illegitimacy rates is partly a result of the decline in adolescent marriage. Although illegitimacy rates for young women in their 20's are higher than for adolescents, the rates for the latter groups have shown a decline over recent years, while the rates for teenagers have been rising.

This paper is based on a book written by the author , on contract with the Center for Population Research, NICHD. Contract # NO1-HD-52821. The book, Adolescent Sexuality in a Changing American Society: Social and Psychological Perspectives is available from the Government Printing Office.

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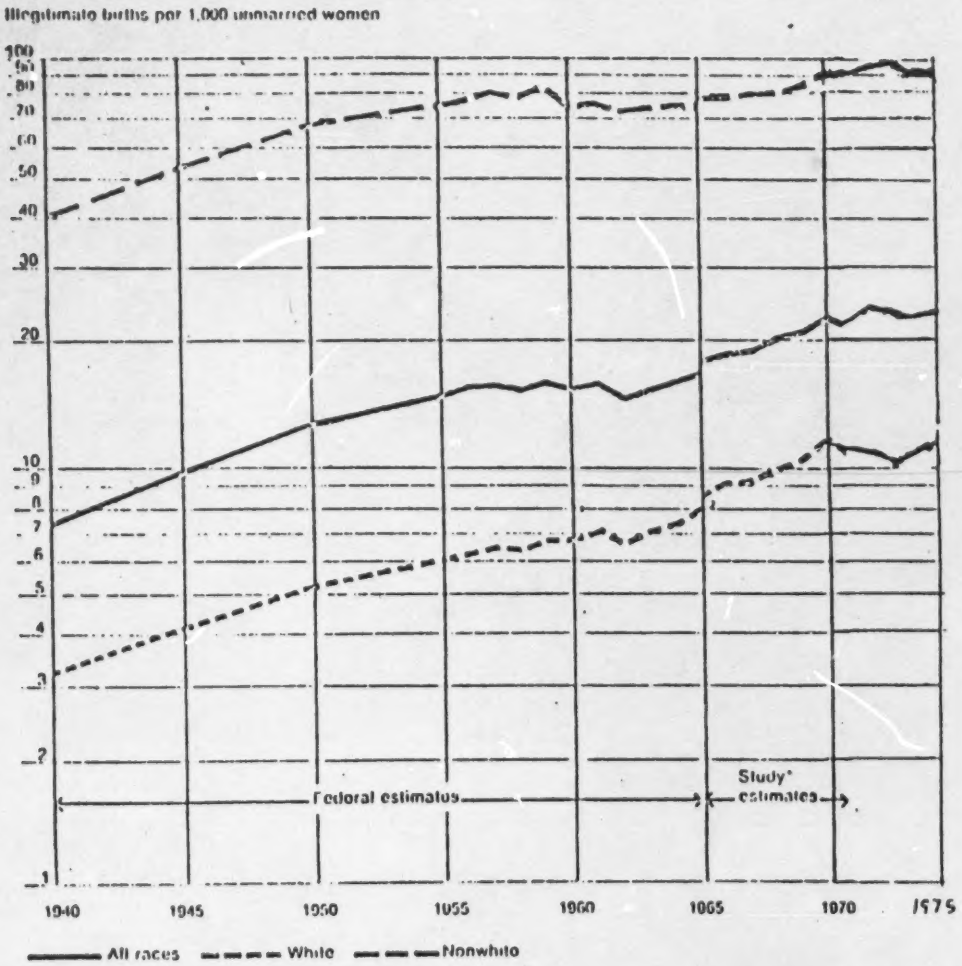
Table I: Percent Change in Legitimate and Illegitimacy Rates 1963-1973 per 1000 Females from less than 15 through age 19

	Percent Change 1963-1973	
Age	Illegitimate	Legitimate
<15	71	-27
15	78	-14
16	90	-23
17	53	-40
18	29	-27
19	11	-43
20	54	-36

Source: Personal Communication, Arthur A. Campbell, Deputy Director Center for Population Research, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

Figure I

Illegitimate births per 1,000 unmarried* women aged 15-19, United States, 1940-1971



Note: Available data plotted every five years 1940-1955 and for each single year thereafter. Data by race not available for 1945

Sklar & Berkov, 1974 and for 1970-1975, recent data from National Center for Health Statistics.

The consequences of child-bearing in early adolescence have been given a great deal of misleading publicity owing, in part, to an overly simplistic and myopic view of the matter; owing, in part, to eager advocates of further federal funding of family planning, abortion, and sex education services for teenagers. Important as these services may be, they simply skim the surface of the problem of early child-bearing, as we shall see.

Frequently cited consequences of teenage parenthood include: early school-leaving, unemployment, welfare dependency, child neglect and abuse, larger completed family size, blocked adult development, desertion and divorce (among those who marry). A careful analysis of research shows that such alleged consequences often have their roots in predisposing factors that tend to cause early pregnancy in the first place. It is seriously inappropriate to assume that the prevention of early child-bearing, by itself, would bring with it such outcomes as: completion of education, employment, financial independence, adequate parenting, marital stability and continuing growth of the adolescent toward social-psychological maturity. Prevention of an early pregnancy might help adolescents achieve these socially desireable goals but, generally speaking, such prevention is only one of many forms of assistance that many adolescents need, including those who are predisposed, by a complex of social, psychological, economic and biological factors to become parents at an early age.

THE CAUSES OF EARLY PREMARITAL COITUS

Social Causes

Early parenting is caused, of course, by early fecundity and intercourse, failure to consistently use effective contraceptives, lack of abortion use, a live birth and, in the case of illegitimacy, failure to marry. It is necessary, therefore, to look at the apparent causes of early parenting by looking at the factors significantly associated with the above behaviors.

Although there are many deficiencies in the available research, it is possible to say with confidence that the incidence of premarital intercourse among white teenagers, age 18 or less, rose markedly from 1967 through 1976. This was particularly true for white females, for whom rates apparently almost tripled between 1965 and 1974; the rates apparently doubled for white males. Changes in rates for black adolescents are difficult to assess because of research deficiencies (See Figures 2 & 3)[1] However, one large study shows that the incidence of premarital coitus increased for both white and black females with each year between the ages of 15 and 19 from 1971 to 1976, with the over-all incidence for black females being about twice that for white ones (Zelnik & Kantner, 1977). See Table II.

An analysis of trends and events in the larger society during the decade of the 1970's shows that, in effect, the social order, as we had known it "fell apart" by 1967. Cultural values that had

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[1] The data on which these figures are based include the following studies: Kinsey, 1953; Gebhard, Pomeroy & Martin, 1958; Lake, 1967; Simon, Berger & Gagnon, 1972; Vener , Stewart & Hager, 1972; Miller, 1973; Sorenson, 1973; Hunt, 1974; Miller & Simon, 1974; Cvetkovich & Grote, 1975; Finkel & Finkel, 1975; Jessor & Jessor, 1975; Kantner & Zelnik, 1975; Udry, Bauman & Morris, 1975.

Table 1. Percent of never-married women aged 15-19 who have ever had intercourse, by age and race, 1976 and 1971

Age	Study year and race											
	1976					1971					% increase 1971-1976	
	All	White		Black		All	White		Black		All	White	Black
		%	N	%	N		%	N	%	N			
15-19	34.9	30.8	1,232	62.7	654	26.8	21.4	2,633	51.2	1,339	30.2	43.9	22.5
15	18.0	13.8	276	38.4	133	13.8	10.9	642	30.5	344	30.4	26.6	25.9
16	25.4	22.6	301	52.6	135	21.2	16.9	662	46.2	320	19.8	33.7	13.9
17	40.9	36.1	277	68.4	139	26.6	21.8	646	58.8	296	53.8	65.6	16.3
18	45.2	43.6	220	74.1	143	36.8	32.3	396	62.7	228	22.8	35.0	18.2
19	55.2	48.7	158	83.6	104	46.8	39.4	287	76.2	151	17.9	23.6	9.7

Note: *In this and subsequent tables*: Base excludes those for whom no information was obtained on intercourse; this amounted in 1971 to 1.2 percent of the never-married blacks and 1.3 percent of the whites; and, in 1976, to 0.9 percent of the blacks and 0.7 percent of the whites. Percentages for whites and blacks are computed from unweighted data (Ns in tables); percentages for total sample are computed from weighted data and thus may sometimes appear to be inconsistent with figures by race. Figures for 1971 differ from earlier published reports because they exclude women living in group quarters. Except where indicated, the base excludes women who did not respond to the question analyzed in the table.

supported such concepts as community, self-restraint, responsibility for others, social justice, the authority of established institutions (church, family, government, education, the professions) were replaced by values and norms that emphasized individual freedoms, rights, immediate self-fulfillment, personal "authenticity" and privacy (See, for example, Yankelovich, 1973; O'Neil 1971). All authority was questioned and, to many, only the present was worthy of consideration. That which had previously been considered deviant became virtually normative, including premarital intercourse for adolescents and the validity of "alternate life styles."

The cultural turn around of the late 1960's had long roots in basic trends toward an increasingly technological, urban, mass, global society. The more immediate roots were in the tragic holocausts of the early and mid 1960's: the assasinations of our three great leaders, the splintering of the civil rights and academic reform movements and their eruption into violence; the shift of the war against poverty to the dubious war in Vietnam; and the fading of the idealistic "flower power" youth movement into severe drug addictions, commercial exploitation, and violence. In brief the dream of the early 1960's of new frontiers, of the the great society became a nightmare of violently failed aspirations for a commonly shared Utopia. Social aspirations were shifted to psychological ones: solace was sought in individual freedoms and fulfillments, rather than in social reform. The so-called sex revolution, in respect to both sexual behavior and sex roles was one aspect of these more pervasive changes.

Girls and women particularly pushed for more sexual freedom because the changing society and its changing norms affected them more drastically than it did men.

These shifts in youth values and attitudes were first experienced by middle and upper class, predominently white youth but, by 1971 they were adopted by many from blue-collar backgrounds. The essential nature of these attitudes --- a profound alienation from established society, had long been held, in many respects, by many low-income black people who had been essentially excluded for generations from the socio-economic main-stream.

This discussion of major social trends which promoted both an increase in premarital intercourse as well as non-marriage on the part of many adolescents has been condensed and overly simplified here. Not all adolescents, by any means, adopted the new cultural norms and these norms affected adolescents in differing ways, depending on a host of interacting variables which shaped their individual lives.

Biological Causes

Biological factors play a part in early child-bearing. For instance, a few studies show that early-maturing adolescents are more likely to have premarital coitus than late maturers (Kinsey, 1948; Chilman, 1962; Presser, 1977; Zelnik & Kantner, 1977).

Psychological Factors

Recent psychological investigations indicate a number of traits significantly differentiate white, sexually active adolescents of high school age from those who have not yet had intercourse. The few available studies show that non-virginal boys and girls are more likely to hold permissive attitudes toward both risk taking and sex, to

generally espouse deviant behaviors and autonomy, to be low in religiosity, to have lower educational expectations and goals, and to have lower school grades. (Cvetkovich and Grote, 1975; Jessor and Jessor, 1975) . Sexually active high school girls (but not boys) tend to be low in self-esteem, to value affection, and to be high in social criticism and alienation (Jessor and Jessor ,1975).

Familial Factors

Family characteristics of sexually active, white high school youngsters show parental behaviors that are relatively low in affection combined with firm discipline, non-traditional parent attitudes, poor communication between parents and teenagers (Jessor & Jessor, 1975; Kantner & Zelnik, 1972; Sorenson, 1973; Ladner, 1972).

Racial Factors

The higher incidence of premarital coitus among black teenagers is probably a result of the effects of the twin burdens of racism and poverty. The part played by the generally lower socio-economic status of black adolescents is illustrated by Zelnik and Kantner's findings in their national study to the effect that black females whose fathers had graduated from college were no more likely than similar white females to have premarital coitus (Kantner & Zelnik, 1971). According to the few available largely anthropological studies,black children are introduced to overt sexuality at an early age in the poverty stricken, socially disorganized urban ghetto. Most low-income black males become sexually active by age 13 or 14. Black adolescent females who date at all find that they must participate in intercourse. Those with high educational-vocational goals (and stern, ambitious mothers), tend to hold themselves aloof from any involvement with males (Ladner, 1972; Rainwater, 1966, 1970; Staples, 1973; Schulz, 1969).

Lower Socio-economic Status

In general, although the data are not universally consistent, adolescents of lower socio-economic status, feeling that they have little hope for high educational status, satisfying future careers and an adequate income are more likely than more fortunately placed adolescents to participate in premarital coitus (Vener & Stewart; 1972; Rubin, 1976).

In summary, a radically changed society, lowered age at physical maturation, rebellious attitudes; low self-esteem; low educational achievement and goals; poverty and racism; defective parent-youth relationships interact in a variety of ways for different individuals to bring about early participation in premarital intercourse.

CAUSES OF FAILURE TO CONSISTENTLY USE EFFECTIVE CONTRACEPTIVES

Trends

Obviously, early intercourse is not the only reason for early pregnancy. Less than a third of sexually active teenagers consistently use effective contraceptives. In general, this use improved for females of both races between 1971 and 1976. However, the numbers of sexually active adolescents also increased, as did the numbers who used no contraceptives at all (Zelnik & Kantner, 1977).

Table III: Reasons Revealed by Research for Failure of Adolescents To Use Contraceptives or to Use Effective Ones Consistently

Demographic Variables

Age Less than 18
Single status
Lower socio-economic status
Minority group status
Not going to college
Being a fundamentalist Protestant

Situational Variables

Not being in a steady, commited relationship
Not having experienced a pregnancy
Having intercourse sporadically
Being in a high stress situation
Not having ready access to a free, confidential family planning service that does not require parental consent
Lack of communication with parents re. contraceptives

Psychological Variables

Desiring a pregnancy; high fertility values
Ignorance of pregnancy risks, of family planning services
Attitudes of fatalism, powerlessness, alienation, incompetence, trusting to luck
Passive, dependent, traditional female role attitudes
High levels of anxiety; low ego strength
Lack of acceptance of the reality of ones own sex behavior
Risk-taking, pleasure oriented attitudes
Fear of contraceptive side-effects and possible infertility

Note: Studies which obtained the above finding are too numerous to list here, in full. Some of the outstanding ones are: Zelnik & Kantner, 1973; Shah, Zelnik & Kantner, 1975; Cvetkovich & Grote, 1975; Ladner, 1972; Miller, 1975; Luker, 1976; Sorenson, 1973; Furstenberg, 1976; Steinoff, 1976; Lindeman, 1974; Rosen, Martindale & Griselda, 1976.

Interacting Social, Psychological & Situational And Demographic Variables

Various studies throw light on why many sexually active adolescents fail to use contraceptives at all or to use effective ones consistently. These findings are summarized in Table III. We can see from this Table that demographic, situational and psychological characteristics interact in a variety of ways to affect the use or non-use of contraceptives. These findings, like those concerned with premarital intercourse, illustrates the complexity of adolescent sexual behavior as well as the fundamental underlying concept that adolescent sexuality, like all human sexuality, can only be understood when we consider all aspects of the person's social, psychological and physical development in the context of the person's life situation at a particular point in his or her personal life, at a particular point in the society's history.

Abortion

The use of abortion among teenagers rose markedly after 1973 when federal funds became available to reduce its costs. Because the availability of these services to teenagers has been so recent, there are only a few studies which adequately assess the characteristics of abortion uses. In general, adolescent users are more apt to be contraceptive users, white, of middle or upper class origins, to have high educational aspirations, to see themselves as competent and to value control over their lives (Gebhard, Pomeroy & Martin, 1958; Gabrielson, 1971; Oppel, 1972; Rosen, Hudson & Martindale, 1976; Steinhoff, 1976). At present, of course, the availability of publicly subsidized abortion is in serious jeopardy: a most unfortunate

turn of events for the many thousands of teenagers and older women who cannot afford the high costs of privately supplied abortions.

Failure to Marry

The final question is: why do sexually active teenagers fail to marry, especially if they are pregnant? Clearly, one reason for this failure is new norms espoused by many hold that births outside of marriage no longer constitute a social disgrace, that a poor marriage may well be worse than no marriage for both mother and child, that mothers of young children should be free to work outside the home, if they so desire (Ross & Sawhill, 1975). Furstenberg (1976) found in his intensive longitudinal study of black, low-income adolescent mothers that, in many cases, young women who married were in a worse educational-vocational position than those who did not, that they were more apt to have additional children and that their marriages tended to dissolve in a few years especially if they had occurred in order to legitimize the child. High youth unemployment rates and the educational deficits of many of the young fathers frequently make early adolescent marriage at least as much of a hindrance as a help.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS & POLICIES

Several themes run through these research findings concerning the network of causes of early child-bearing outside of marriage. In general, it appears that young adolescents fail to take the steps which would prevent such an occurrence when they feel that there is little future for them in society as learners, earners, and marital partners. They tend to feel that traditional society has few rewards for them. They are likely to suffer from feelings of powerlessness, incompetence, low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, distrust of others. They probably have difficulties in communication, in forming interpersoanl relationships, and in accepting their own sexuality. Developmentally speaking, many are apt to be at a stage in which it is difficult for them to conceptualize the long-range impact of their behaviors, to deal independently with the value confusions of the present era, to make responsible commitments to others. Many have sufferred and continue to suffer the multiple burdens imposed by poverty, by racism.

Findings summarized in this way have a host of implications. At the policy level, these findings point once again to the importance of income maintenance, employment, adequate housing, equal opportunities and high quality human services for children, adolescents, and their families. Obviously, these recommendations go far beyond the more usual and immediate

ones of family planning services for adolescents (useful as they may be) and sex education programs (which have yet to demonstrate a significant impact on adolescent behavior).

At an even more basic level, the alienated, distrustful, anxious attitudes of many teenagers probably are based, in part, on deeply-disturbing world-wide problems of energy shortages, air and water pollution, threats of the nuclear bomb, mass hunger, and the like. The more thoughtful the adolescent, the more he/she is apt to be aware that the world's future is, indeed, dubious. Policies aimed at effectively reducing these threats are needed, in any case. They also should help in giving young people more reason to behave in planful ways for a hopeful future.

At the program level, these findings poignantly show the critical need for a more humane and sensitive approach to young people and their vulnerabilities. We need to develop numerous ways to help them feel more competent, significant, valuable, and effective as people. We need to help them clarify their values about many aspects of living including the sexual aspects, to communicate with each other, their parents, and ourselves about their feelings and desires as young men and young women; to develop the underlying trust in self and others which is fundamental to rewarding human relationships. We need to recognize that society and its norms have changed drastically and that our struggles toward a more humane and honest approach to sexuality has its potential rewards as well as hazards. As educators and counselors we need to learn from adolescents what it is like to have grown up in the savage sixties, the cynical seventies. We need to reaffirm for ourselves and others that

sexuality is potentially the most intimate, fulfilling, complex and delicate aspect of the total self, that it is not simply a technological problem to be managed so as to control human reporduction. We need to re-examine current cultural norms that so heavily favor individualism, hedonism, total freedom, a now-orientation, responsibility only for the self. These norms need to be balanced by values which also support a commitment to community, freedom within limits, responsibility toward (though not for others) and an orientation toward the future as well as the present.

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